

Community-Powered Handloom Cooperative: Driving Economic and Social Empowerment in Jhiri Village, Rajasthan (India)

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Abstract

The Indian handloom weaving industry employs over three million people and is the second-largest economic activity after agriculture. It accounts for 15% of the country's cloth production. However, due to stiff competition from power looms and low incomes, the number of handloom workers across the country has been gradually declining. This has resulted in the loss of the traditional art form. The majority of handloom weaving occurs in individual households and not as an organized activity. This leaves weavers at the mercy of larger players and leads to extreme exploitation.

Furthermore, a significant number of handloom cooperatives have become obsolete. Despite challenges, the Adarsh Handloom Producer Cooperative Society Ltd (AHCS), located in one of Rajasthan's most underdeveloped districts, demonstrates how community ownership of handloom weaving and collective decision-making can enhance the income of weavers and allied workers. This has resulted in a financially viable business model that produces quality products while serving a social purpose by bringing about significant changes in the community.

Overview of the Handloom Sector in India

The Handloom Sector is part of the country's rich cultural heritage, dating back thousands of years. It is one of the oldest cottage industries in India. According to the Fourth All India Handloom Census (2019-20), there are 28.2 lakh handlooms in India, with 31.45 lakh households engaged in weaving and allied activities. The sector employs 26.73 lakh weavers and 8.48 lakh allied workers, making it the second-largest economic activity following agriculture. The majority of weaver households are located in Assam (10.9 lakhs), West Bengal (3.4 lakhs), Manipur (2.1 lakhs), and Tamil Nadu (1.7 lakhs). Handloom weaving is still predominantly rural; 88.7% of weaver households are in villages. Additionally, nearly 72% of handloom weavers in the country are female.

According to the Handloom Census, approximately 67% of weavers still earn less than ₹5,000 per month, which is lower than the minimum wage earned by unskilled workers. This has resulted in a decline in the overall number of weavers, from 43.31 lakhs in 2009-10 to 35.25 lakhs in 2019-20.

Challenges Faced by Handloom Weavers and Cooperatives in India

Handloom weaving is an important traditional industry in India, but today, handloom weavers face many challenges that threaten their craft's survival. Weavers often work in poor conditions, earn low wages, and face difficulties procuring raw materials and selling their products. The rise of power looms has intensified competition and led to declining demand for handloom products. Moreover, weavers struggle to access credit and effectively market their products due to a lack of government support. These factors have led to a decline in the number of weavers. Women make up a significant portion of the workforce in handloom weaving but are often invisible as ghost workers and receive inadequate compensation. The patriarchy within families of weavers ensures that gender disparity remains, even when women are paid. These issues are compounded by a historical stigma attached to labor perpetuated by the caste system and colonial rule. Most weavers come from Dalit, Tribal, and other socially and economically disadvantaged communities.

Handloom cooperatives would have played a major part in organizing these weavers and improving bargaining power. But they face numerous challenges. While cooperative movements were once strong and supported by the government, this support has decreased in recent years. Politicians and vested interests have controlled existing cooperatives. Of the 21,765 registered Primary Weavers' Cooperative Societies, only around 50% are partially functional, covering only 15% of weavers in the country. Most weavers work either independently or under master weavers/traders, who take a significant share of the profits. This leaves the weavers with meager wages. Most handloom cooperatives are controlled by one or two individuals who call themselves cooperatives to obtain government funds.

Backwardness in the Largest Indian State

Rajasthan is the largest Indian state by area and seventh largest by population. According to the Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index (MPI) 2021, it has a poverty rate of 24.8%. Nine out of 33 districts in Rajasthan have over 40% of the population living in poverty. The state heavily relies on agriculture, with 70% of its people depending on it, and more than half of cultivable land relies on rainfall. Lack of employment opportunities has forced large rural populations to migrate to cities. The handloom sector has the potential to provide a livelihood for many. But recent data shows Rajasthan has only 8,687 handloom workers and 1,403 allied workers, with just 6,000 operational handlooms.

Empowering Marginalized Communities Through Social Innovation at the Grassroots



Women weavers of AHCS display the fabric at Jhiri village, Rajasthan

The Manoharthana block in the Jhalawar district is one of the most backward areas in Rajasthan. It is riddled with low literacy rates, high child mortality, and a population primarily composed of Lodha, Tambar Rajput, Bhil, Meena, and Mewati (Muslim) communities. In 2004, Adarsh Hathkargha Vastra Utpadak Sahkari Samiti Ltd., also known as the Adarsh Handloom Producer Cooperative Society Ltd. (AHCS), was established in Jhiri village of Manoharthana in the Jhalawar District of Rajasthan. This was the objective of providing alternative sources of income for the area's farmers. Many individuals involved in creating AHCS are also members of Hum Kisan Sangathan ('We the Farmers' Collective'), an informal group of farmers dedicated to improving the lives of farmer families. The Sangathan raises awareness about issues such as harmful debt cycles caused by unfair money lenders, domestic violence, and religious intolerance.

The journey began at Manthan Shikshan Kendra, an alternative school where weaving was part of the curriculum. Other women joined, and a cooperative society was formed with 20 members, each contributing Rs. 3,000. This resulted in a seed capital of Rs. 60,000. However, a major problem was that community members lacked technical expertise in weaving. Fortunately, in 2006, Weavers' Service Centers (WSC), an initiative of the Ministry of Textiles, organized a training program that helped community members acquire the necessary skills. It partly funded

the training program as well. Moreover, the cooperative received a grant from the government to purchase cotton yarn and some handlooms.



The Ahavastra brand's collection of men's and women's clothes

In 2008-09, the brand was named 'Ahavastra.' One of the first milestones for the brand was achieved in 2008 when its fabric and dyeing process received a 5 out of 5-star rating for quality from the leading retail store, 'FabIndia.' This rating was achieved after a rigorous 10-parameter testing process. Today, the brand produces and sells a variety of products for both men and women, including kurtas, stoles, dupattas, jackets, and more. Additionally, they produce carpets, bed sheets, cushion covers, towels/saafis, and other items. The fabric used is of the finest quality, made from 100% cotton thread and primarily VAT dyes (chemical dyes with the least impact on the environment) to achieve superior, fast colors that will not fade over time. The cloth comes in a variety of colors and patterns. Ahavastra is now a registered trademark with a logo.

The cooperative's produce is certified as 100% handloom by the Government of India's Textile Ministry and bears the 'Handloom Mark' on its products. Today, Ahavastra brand products are sold internationally too. AHCS obtained an Import Export Code (IEC), enabling it to export its goods. Aside from local Rajasthani markets in India, their products are available in major cities such as Kolkata, Pune, Lucknow, Delhi, and Udaipur. Products are also sold through the online handicraft store, Itokri.



Handloom weavers from the cooperative are engaged in weaving at Jhiri, Rajasthan

Since 2004, AHCS has grown from two handlooms and 10 members to employing nearly 120 people and owning 40 handlooms. They are now involved in weaving as well as other allied work such as warping, dyeing, tailoring, and more, with nearly 60 members. The majority of the workers are women. The cooperative affirms its belief in empowering women by providing work opportunities, earning an income, and finding value outside traditional house and farm work. AHCS has maintained steady growth over the years. The total turnover in 2014-15 was INR 10 lakhs which gradually increased to INR 39 lakhs in 2018-2019. The COVID-19 crisis impacted the handloom sector, and AHCS was no exception to this. It is slowly recovering from the economic slowdown, and the turnover was now close to 25-30 lakhs in the financial year 2022-23. On average, AHCS sells around around 8-10 thousand meters in fabric per year.

Weaving Together Community and Sustainability: The Success Behind the Unique Handloom Cooperative Model



Core Weavers group of AHCS

1. **Collective decision-making:** The members of the cooperative are involved in all aspects of the decision-making process, including product development, marketing, and final sales of products. Decisions on bonuses and wages are also made in meetings where all the members participate.
2. **Flexibility and benefits:** The cooperative allows all its members a higher degree of independence. Weaves get better wages, timely bonuses, and flexible working hours. Profit is shared equally among the members of the cooperative. It believes in the concept of fair trade, where producers should get the maximum benefit. It also provides monetary help to its workers in terms of any medical or other emergency issues.
3. **No dependency on government funds:** AHCS has not been dependent on government funds or any non-government organization since its inception. It has allowed for more autonomy and beyond the control of any powerful people. Today, the cooperative is financed fully with self-funds generated by the sales of its products.
4. **A profitable business model:** AHCS has been profitable right since its beginning. It believes that social enterprises should be profitable, serves the social purpose, and not deviate from the ideals it was built in. But social purpose does not mean it should compromise the quality of the products or financial losses.
5. **Eco-friendly:** AHCS leaves a minimal carbon footprint in running its business. Except for the yarn processed in a mill, handloom is entirely hand-touched and produced without

energy or causing a minimum carbon footprint. These products are also good for the skin. Most of the raw materials are procured locally, which also benefits other local producers of the region.

6. Knowledge sharing: AHCS is committed to sharing its knowledge and skills with smaller groups that lack the necessary expertise. To this end, it has trained over 200-250 weavers from Rajasthan and other parts of the country, and several of these smaller groups have become established units in other regions. At AHCS, we firmly believe that knowledge belongs to the commons and must be shared for the greater good.
7. Supporting social initiatives within the community: As part of the commitment to social responsibility, AHCS actively supports various community initiatives, ranging from education to environmental sustainability. These initiatives include:
 - A school for rural children where creativity and curiosity are celebrated.
 - A community theater group seeking to raise awareness about social issues like domestic violence and the importance of utilizing hospitals to treat injuries.
 - Art classes for handloom members, where ideas of color and shape are explored, and a sense of pride in occupation is encouraged.

Impact of AHCS

The AHCS has successfully improved the income levels of the weavers who previously depended solely on farming for survival, thereby stemming migration. Additionally, it has instilled confidence among them that they can acquire new skills and earn a livelihood with dignity and self-worth, and be involved in the decision-making process. The journey of AHCS has been full of ups and downs. But the firm self-belief of the weavers has enabled the cooperative to stand its ground and gradually expand its operations. Despite operating in a community with patriarchy and caste dynamics, AHCS has instilled values of equality, justice, and liberty among its workers and members. Since the majority of weavers in the cooperative are women, they receive their wages directly. This empowers them to have control over their income and spend their earnings on their families at home. She enjoys a higher status at home. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, when operations were halted, all workers received wages, creating confidence among them that the collective stand strong with them in moments of crisis. Through its high-quality products, AHCS has built a loyal customer base and maintained good sales through word-of-mouth publicity.



Challenges

Scaling the business poses a major challenge for AHCS as it requires additional investments in capital and trained manpower. Previously, they used to sell products to big online retail companies, but the experience was unsatisfactory for the weavers as they did not get a good deal. Big players are monopolizing the industry, and some business houses or NGO-run entrepreneurial ventures/startups make tall claims as saviors of poor weavers/artisans to improve their living standards. Still, the reality is the opposite: they are too profit-oriented and prioritize making huge margins over social objectives. As a result, AHCS stopped selling to these companies.

To overcome the scaling issue, AHCS needs to create its own website to generate more profits and provide direct benefits to the weavers. With a website, AHCS can sell more diversified and customized products in line with customer demands, essential for competing in today's digital market. However, an online store requires a higher inventory and skilled manpower, such as photographers and web operators. Moreover, experts may need to reside in Jhiri village for longer periods.

AHCS also needs to procure raw materials, such as yarn, from direct markets in Delhi or Southern states such as Tamil Nadu. Governmental organizations in Rajasthan often cause delays

or fail to meet the cooperative's requirements. Although various government schemes claim to improve capacity building for the weavers, their implementation on the ground varies, and the cooperative has not received much help from the state.

The Future Vision of Adarsh Hathkargha Cooperative Society: Building a Sustainable and Inclusive Handloom Ecosystem

Adarsh Cooperative aims to continue empowering the local community and promoting sustainable practices through its handloom operations while expanding its reach and increasing profitability. The handloom sector in Rajasthan has the potential for significant growth, with opportunities for innovation and increased access to national and international markets. AHCS believes that the ailing handloom industry in Rajasthan can be revived through honest and organized efforts. With a decreasing dependence on agriculture, people seek alternative employment opportunities in rural and semi-urban areas, making handloom a viable option. Handloom products are environmentally friendly and do not require heavy machinery or power, making them a sustainable alternative. The demand for quality handloom products is growing globally, especially in foreign countries where consumers prioritize eco-friendliness and fair trade. The negative impact of multinational textile companies employing sweat labor in developing countries has led to increased demand for products built with 100 % fair trade. The benefits should reach producers directly rather than middlemen and MNCs.

Few of the Future Plans of AHCS

1. Creating a common platform: AHCS aims to bring together smaller handloom weavers' groups under a common platform as it believes organized efforts would help the groups share their expertise and knowledge with each other and understand how to better negotiate with markets and the government.
2. Create a unique brand: Pashmina Kani shawls from Kashmir, Pochampally sarees from Andhra Pradesh, Kanjivaram sarees from Tamil Nadu, Eri silk weaves from Assam, loom-woven textiles from Nagaland, and Manipuri handlooms have established themselves as distinguished handlooms in India and around the world. Following in their footsteps, Rajasthan Khadi and Jhalawar handloom clothes have the potential to achieve similar recognition, thereby positioning Rajasthan as the epicenter of the Indian handloom sector.
3. Utilizing modern mediums: AHCS endeavors to employ all modern methods, including updated technology and various platforms, to effectively market goods and improve product sales. As the market constantly evolves, staying updated with modern marketing channels and techniques is important to ensure long-term success.

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